



# China's Old Dwellings

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THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS has become one of the premier publishers of outstanding scholarly works on the Asia-Pacific region, and this book is a fine example. *China's Old Dwellings* by Ronald Knapp is a fascinating and comprehensive study of the vernacular architecture of old China. The book is amply illustrated with 550 photographs, drawings, and maps. Professor Knapp brings to this volume a richness and depth of scholarship reflecting 30 years of fieldwork in China. Most importantly, *China's Old Dwellings* has recorded for posterity a vanishing traditional cultural landscape.

The book is divided into four parts containing seven chapters. Part One presents a literature review by Western and Chinese scholars and iconographers of academic and related studies on folk architecture, beliefs, symbols, and living environments.

Part Two, "Spaces and Structures," is divided into chapters 2 and 3, which explain spatial composition and the building structures of older buildings. In Chapter 2, for example, the author explains that a *Jian* is a measurement of both the width of two or more lateral columns and of the volume or void between such columns. A *Kaijian*, which uses the character for *Jian*, describes the horizontal component or section of building space across the façade, while a third measure, *Jia*, is the depth of the building. This explanation and subsequent ones show the permutations of basic concepts as they are expressed in the alignment of buildings, courtyards, tiers, doorways, and halls. The discussions are amply illustrated with diagrams, drawings, and photographs.

Chapter 3, "Building Structures," is a richly detailed and photo-documented study of the materials and methods of dwelling construction. The sheer variety of building materials demonstrates



the wide diversity of resources found throughout China's regions. Attention is paid to how building materials for beams, walls, roofs, doorways, windows, and decorative motifs are produced and combined. Examples vary from humble peasant rooms to mansions.

The immense variety of building types and styles found throughout China makes a regional classification system difficult, thus in Part Three, "Places and Regions," the author has elected to follow geographer Jin Qiming's criteria of regional culture realms. Accordingly, in this classification the three basic culture realms of China are Northern, Southern, and Western. While physical and climatic factors have affected building choice, style, and materials, migration also has been an important factor in the commingling of styles found throughout China.

The first region examined is North China, a culture hearth area, where there is an imposing history of dwelling types and styles. The *dayuan* or *zhuangyuan* (manor or estate) are important historical buildings that occupied large portions of villages, towns, or city sites. An outstanding example of a large estate is the Qiao *dayuan*, which is now a tourist site. The rise and fall from wealth and power of the Qiao family is briefly described in order to supply background information to the accompanying text and photographs. Rock, cave, and sunken houses are a sample of unusual dwelling types found in North China. Their origin, structure, and common usage is discussed in this section. Of particular interest in Chapter 4, "Dwellings in North China," are descriptions of how rooms were used in many of the old dwellings, thus providing an insight into Chinese family life.

Readers familiar with rural and urban areas of Southeast Asia will recognize many of the building types found in Chapter 5, "Dwellings in Southern China." The farmsteads and houses of Southern China are rich in variety and texture. The author includes a representative sample from the most humble dwellings to the mansions of wealthy merchants and warlords of pre-Revolutionary China. The discussion of Hakka dwellings and fortresses in the mountainous regions of southern China is noteworthy. Today, the Hakka, a Han (Chinese) subgroup, are widely dispersed throughout southern China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and North America.



The last section of Chapter 5 is titled "Ethnic Minority Houses in Southwest China." These dwellings include elements also found throughout areas of Southeast Asia such as stilt houses, non-load-bearing adobe, bamboo construction, and long-style verandahs. The author's discussion draws out the differences between the ethnic minority peoples such as Dai, Jingpo, Lisu, Naxi, Zhuang, and Dong, and their Han neighbors.

In Chapter 6, "Dwellings in Western China," the author chronicles the dwelling types of China's ethnic populations living in the autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang as well as the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai, the northern area of Yunnan, and the western part of Sichuan and Ningxia. All of these autonomous regions and provinces have large populations of ethnic minority peoples with a particular cultural ecology that is represented in their dwelling types. Several pages in the chapter are devoted to an examination of the unique stone buildings of Tibetans in Lhasa. However, rural Tibetan farmsteads, shrine constructions, and nomads' tents, also part of the Tibetan landscape, are also defined and explained. The unique architecture of the Uygur people of Xinjiang is discussed. The Uygurs are noted for their courtyards dwellings and shade-producing designs and gardens. The Turfan basin is the heartland of the Uygurs and dwellings in this area are important examples of adaptation to extreme climatic conditions. Temperatures in the Turfan basin during some months of the year can exceed 124°F. Examination of the origins, construction, and use of Kazak yurts and Mongolian *Ger* (tent) provides a useful explanation of the interrelationships of these particular ethnic groups with their environment and cultural settings.

In the past several decades, many of Asia's unique dwelling and cultural landscapes have been destroyed. Globalization and the Asian economic "miracle" of the late 1980s and 1990s resulted in a homogenization of architecture and thus a loss of many landscape features that distinguish one region, town, or city from another. In China, traditional dwelling spaces began to disappear in the post-revolutionary era when Soviet-style socialist architecture became the norm. Socialist architecture is expressed in uniform worker housing coupled with adjacent factories and the large block-style state



buildings. The post-Communist landscape of many of the ex-Communist countries of Asia and Europe are representative of this style.

In China, the Soviet-style socialist architecture has given way to the newer "capitalist" style. Throughout China, white tile and blue glass-fronted buildings define public and commercial architecture. Old dwellings continue to be demolished and replaced by the modern high-rise, high-rent apartments in coastal cities, or plain brick-and-mortar buildings in outlying provinces. Overall, *China's Old Dwellings* is timely and will serve as a valuable recording of a historical landscape that is rapidly disappearing.

